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DAVID SCHELL. Philosophical Unity in the Keats Letters.
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Criticism of Keats's odes seldom fails to take into consideration the important seemingly opposite philosophical statements of his letters. In particular, the "Adam's dream," "Negative Capability," and "Vale of Soul-making" letters are often mentioned, although seldom are they related to one another. In general, writers tend to limit discussion to one of the most important statements, as does J. M. Murry with his "Soul Making" in Keats and Shakespeare, or W. J. Bate in his various discussions of "Negative Capability." In consequence, a survey of the literature on the subject yields the impression that Keats was a many sided, if not inconsistent thinker, the strength of whose poetry derives largely from its binding quality, or the manner in which aesthetic technique achieves the unification of opposing concepts. The purpose of this thesis is to suggest the incorrectness of this impression by arguing against Douglas Bush's contention that the "identity" of Keats's "Soul-making" letter is inconsistent with his concept of "Negative Capability."

After some remarks about Keats's epistoleric style and the general nature of his conceptual unity, Chapter II begins an analysis of the "Soul-making" letter with the

purpose of defining Keats's notion of the world and the manner in which it relates to the human soul. Here the important point is that worldly experience is to be viewed as a prototype for spiritual experience--that man's "Heart" is his means of ideal vision. Chapter III, a discussion of the "Adam's dream" letter, then considers Keats's concepts of spiritual experience and takes up, in particular, the manner in which these concepts are expressed with such terms as "imagination," "beauty," and "truth." Here the imagination is shown to be the vision, or identity, of the soul, and emphasis is placed on the relation of the poet's soul to the ideals of his art. In Chapter IV a discussion of "Negative Capability" then equates Keats's ideas of "identity" in vision and imagination with the seemingly opposing concept of the artist's non-existence, or his identity in identification; and, finally, Chapter V consists of the expression of such an equation in terms of a model for the structure of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." This discussion is designed to counter the numerous arguments, including Mr. Bush's, that the poem reflects dramatically the disunity of Keats's thought.

PHILOSOPHICAL UNITY IN THE KEATS LETTERS

by

David Schell

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CHAPTER I
THE PROBLEM OF UNITY

Keats wrote to his friend J. H. Reynolds:

. . . some kind of letters are good squares others handsome ovals, and others some orbicular, others spheroid--and why should there not be another species with two rough edges like a Rat-trap? I hope you will find all my long letters of that species, and all will be well; for by merely touching the spring delicately and etherially, the rough edged will fly immediately into a proper compactness, and thus you make a good wholesome loaf, with your own leaven in it, of my fragments. . . .¹

He thus gives good advice not only to his friend but to the generations of scholars who would later come to scrutinize as documents of literary criticism the notes he hastily, and sometimes passionately, scrawled to the members of his circle. By no means did Keats consider each letter a polished critical draft, nor all of the letters together a definitive statement of his philosophy. Rather, each was part of the continuous speculation provoked by the communications and intimate overflow of an uncontainable life, and just as he expected each one of them to "fly immediately into a proper compactness," so perhaps he would hold that there is a spring governing the entire collection. Keats

¹The Letters of John Keats, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), I, 80. Hereafter cited as Letters.

knew that his thinking was unified only by his life and that his speculations all derived from that unity--a unity which could not conceivably find single expression except perhaps in poetry. Certainly he knew also that each of his serious epistoleric speculations participated in the central core of his thinking and being, and that, taken together, they joined to create an impression of that unity. Few authors have made, at the same time, such a loving and exacting demand on the mind and heart of an individual correspondent, and fewer still have required, by implication, so much of the minds and hearts of the unanticipated generations of readers to come.

Work with the letters then is at best informative, even inspiring, but as Keats himself suggests, not a "whole-some loaf" unless leavened and baked by the heart of the individual reader. There are, moreover, sufficient analogies in the letters with the substance of his poems to enhance a reading of the poems. In the spirit of Keats's own writing, it is perhaps the heart schooled in his letters that is best able to appreciate the fullness of life and thought which his odes, in particular, represent. Keats's own "Soul-making" model may, therefore, best describe the relationship the letters bear to the poems.

It is difficult to avoid turning the letters into a set of rules to explain the odes. It is easiest, of course,

simply to analyze the logic of terms, as Newell F. Ford does in his otherwise impressive work, The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats.² But Keats himself abhorred "consequitive reasoning" of this type, having too great a faith in his "affections"³ to wish to submit them to the limiting rigor of logic. His philosophy, like his poetry, is highly organic, built on analogy and fusion, rather than axiom and proposition; it is an associative, not a logical, philosophy of aesthetics. It is a philosophy that demands "leaven." It is not, then, what the letters yield as analytic results which is important to a reading of the odes; it is not the specific details of them as related to the poetry, or the clear facts deducible from them which shed light on the mysteries of his art; it is rather the total experience they provide when fused and leavened in the reader's mind and heart into a sense of Keats's apprehension of life. In other words, one finds in the letters a sense of what Keats expresses in his best poetry.

However, only in passing have the best writers touched on the unified aspect of the letters. In general, writers have dismissed unity of concept to agree with Douglas Bush that a mammoth contradiction lies central

²The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats, Stanford University Publications, University Series, Language and Literature, IX, 2 (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1951), pp. 9-19.

³Letters, I, 185.

to Keats's thinking, that the "identity" of the "vale of Soul-making" is inconsistent with "Negative Capability."⁴ As a consequence, much elaborate and strained criticism of the poetry has resulted. It is, therefore, necessary to re-evaluate the major statements of the letters with the intention of relating them all to a unified core of Keats's thought, with the hope of finding a consistency among them. Before such a reevaluation is begun, however, it is perhaps fruitful to motivate discussion with some general remarks about Keats and his thought.

The central preoccupation of Keats's thought and life is best characterized jointly by the words "poetry" and "religion." As a poet and seeker after truth, Keats's posture was that of one who cannot understand what he knows, who yet knows with certainty what he can "but dimly perceive."⁵ If there is any contradiction in Keats, it may indeed be here, on this point. And yet such a contradiction is rather one of vision than of logic. It is best, then, to consider Keats's thought as a self-conscious attempt to unify his vision rather than his vision as the expression of an intellectual paradox. It is then observed

⁴Douglas Bush, "Keats and His Ideas," The Major English Romantic Poets: A Symposium in Reappraisal, ed. Clarence D. Thorpe, Carlos Baker, and Bennet Weaver (Southern Illinois University Press, 1957), rpt. in English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. M. H. Abrams (Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), p. 333.

⁵Letters, II, 102.

that the fusions and unifying images of his poetry are paralleled by an equally unifying intellectual concept.

If Keats can be considered religious in the sense that he is concerned with the relationships of a frequently incomprehensible real world with a conceivable, or idealized, spiritual one, then his poetry can be considered religious in that it is an attempt to objectify that relationship. It would be improper to argue, however, that Keats was religious above all else. According to W. J. Bate's thorough reconstruction of Keats's intellectual development, and from certain of the earliest poems ("To George Felton Matthew," "Epistle to My Brother George," and "Sleep and Poetry") it seems far more likely that his earliest thoughts concerned only poetry and the kind of literary immortality too little involved with "beauty" and "truth" to be construed as religious.⁶ If he became religious, it was through poetry, so that his theology is sufficiently rooted in the growth of his art to be inseparable from it. His identity as a poet must remain preeminent.

The poetic identity Keats strove to achieve was one which would objectify that religious relationship of the real with the spiritual worlds, one unencumbered by "disagreeables."⁷ Only to such a poet would poetry come "as

⁶Walter Jackson Bate, John Keats (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 108-148.

⁷Letters, I, 192.

easy as leaves to a tree."⁸ But this identity was not one to grow out of intellectual or traditional religious experience, nor even as a criticism of these in the form of a renegade mysticism. Depending almost entirely on his own experience, he derived his religion from a quality of vision--he perceived within his own being a characteristic human harmony, the essence of being human, in what remains everlastingly God's world. Fulfillment of his religion was the eternalization of this vision in a transmutation of real experience into an equal timelessness with God's. In other words, for Keats, vision, individual identity, and eternity, all comprehensible only in terms of a decidedly Platonic God, are inextricable from one another and, for him, religion has more to do with the spontaneous involvement in one's humanity than with belief in abstract ideas. Identity then is the quality of self-awareness which joins man with God. It is also the poetic identity which joins the real and spiritual worlds. This identity is very much similar to Keats's concept of the "soul" as expressed in the "Soul-making" letter. What is most significant, however, is that it is similar also to Keats's idea of "Negative Capability," more identical with it than at all contradictory, and, therefore, consistent with his most penetrating statements concerning the poetic character.

⁸Letters, I, 238.

In order to discuss the major themes of Keats's philosophy and to point out the consistency among them, it is necessary to limit the sphere of discussion to the statements, or the themes, of three letters. These statements are "Soul-making,"⁹ the "Adam's dream" letter, with its references to beauty and truth,¹⁰ and "Negative Capability."¹¹ The order of the letters as they are dealt with here is not the order in which they occur chronologically. It is accepted as basic to this discussion that the ordering of the actual letters makes no difference, that Keats had all these notions in mind throughout, and that these notions may have found expression in any number of forms preceding those letters which still survive. It seems illogical to assume that the letters mirror a strict chronology in Keats's mind. It may very well be that his first thoughts concerning the "vale of Soul-making" came long before he jotted them down to the George Keatses, as is the case with the "indolent" letter,¹² which antedated the

⁹Letters, II, 101-104. The "Soul-making" statement occurs in a section of the long journal letter to the George Keatses, dated 21 April 1819, in its entirety No. 159 in Rollins.

¹⁰Letters, I, 183-187. The "Adam's dream" letter is addressed to Benjamin Bailey, dated 22 November 1817.

¹¹Letters, I, 191-194. The "Negative Capability" letter is addressed to George and Tom Keats, dated (probably) 27 December 1817.

¹²Letters, II, 78-81. Another section of the journal letter No. 159.

writing of the famous ode by at least six months. It is meant to be significant, however, that the order the letters are placed in here does reflect the induction of Keats's thought: consideration of worldly experience in the "vale of Soul-making" is followed by speculations about the imagination, or the soul's function, in the "Adam's dream" letter, and, finally, the soul's expression in poetry is taken up as "Negative Capability."

CHAPTER II

SOUL-MAKING

The worldly dimension of experience is most thoroughly explored in the "Soul-making" letter. In this, the most basic of the letters to be considered, Keats discusses the bearing of worldly experience on the growth of spiritual life, or the "soul." Keats is primarily concerned in it with the manner in which a human being actually acquires a soul, stressing that the world of experience is absolutely essential to the soul's development and, consequently, that conventional religious concepts are far from adequate for his purposes. He claims that there is no changing the basic divinity of man's being, but that there is a vast difference between being just a spark of God and being a human soul with a unique identity. An intelligence which comes from God, he says, does not become a soul until it acquires an "identity." Identity, however, develops from the relation of intelligence with experience and pain. Identity then is the central issue of "Soul-making," although not in the manner of "those who have a proper self," or "Men of Power,"¹ for it is no set group of ideas, but rather a capacity for experience and vision.

¹Letters, I, 184.

To understand Keats's concept of identity, it is perhaps best to begin with his introductory remarks on the nature of human experience. Here he defines the nature of worldly, or real, experience to be considered in the "Soul-making" discussion, and the reason for man's absolute reliance on real experience for his spiritual development.

Keats writes:

The most interesting question that can come before us is, How far by the persevering endeavours of a seldom appearing Socrates Mankind may be made happy--I can imagine such happiness carried to an extreme--but what must it end in?--Death--and who could in such a case bear with death--the whole troubles of life which are now frittered away in a series of years, would the[n] be accumulated for the last days of a being who instead of hailing its approach, would leave this world as Eve left Paradise--But in truth I do not at all believe in this sort of perfectibility--the nature of the world will not admit of it--the inhabitants of the world will correspond to itself--Let the fish philosophise the ice away from the Rivers in winter time and they shall be at continual play in the tepid delight of summer. Look at the Poles and at the sands of Africa, Whirlpools and volcanoes--Let men exterminate them and I will say that they may arrive at earthly Happiness--The point at which Man may arrive is as far as the paralel state in inanimate nature and no further--For instance suppose a rose to have sensation, it blooms on a beautiful morning it enjoys itself--but there comes a cold wind, a hot sun--it can not escape it, it cannot destroy its annoyances--they are as native to the world as itself: no more can man be happy in spite, the world[lly] elements will prey upon his nature. . . .²

J. M. Murry's remarks on this passage deal with Keats's reality in terms of the nature of his mind.³

²Letters, II, 101.

³John Middleton Murry, Keats and Shakespeare (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1925), pp. 132-148. The chapter is entitled "Soul-Making."

According to Murry, Keats had one of those purely poetic minds which must proceed to truth by the perception of harmony. To such a mind, the consecutive rigor of logic is irrelevant. Instead the mind works with patterns and metaphors, and beauty is the test of truth. In this passage, Keats is discussing man's place in the harmony of the world, a harmony which can be considered beautiful in spite of the suffering and death it includes. In Murry's interpretation, Keats first confronts many conventional religious notions by dismissing as foolish the idea that misery and suffering must be eliminated if man is to be happy. He asserts that death's inevitability requires suffering as a necessary preparation. His implication is that to eliminate pain upsets the natural order in which death is actually least objectionable. This is the empirical Keats who is capable of a scientist's acceptance of worldly phenomena. Yet his empiricism is based on an hierarchy of troubles which derives from a principle of poetic justice. It is partially his idea of justice more than his metaphoric turn of mind which gives greater meaning to the idea of natural order in the often quoted passage about the rose.

According to Murry, Keats goes on to say that not only is "perfectibility" undesirable, it is simply not man's nature as part of an order where death is as natural and as inevitable as life itself. In describing the

enjoyment of the rose at the most basic natural level, Keats shows why suffering and death must be a part of man's experience as well. He suggests that there is a balance struck between an organism and its environment, involving destructive forces whose claim to existence is equal with that of the lives they threaten. Keats's point is that man fits the world as does the rose, and his blush pales as the rose's. This is good, he implies, not tragic, and the only superiority in man lies in a spirituality which comes not from trying to conquer life but by accepting it and looking to intensify the experience that it does offer.

In addition to Murry's reasoning, it might be further pointed out that in this "harmony" which Keats has discerned, there is no great concern with temporality. Keats's eye, dealing primarily with images which are generally arrested in time, here seizes on life from birth to death as a totality of reference, a kind of eternal object. He looks for meaning in the depth of image rather than in its extension pointlessly through time. This is an expression of Keats's aversion to reasoning in the abstract; and his preference always for dealing only with the concrete. In short, unable to accept the notion of eternity, it was necessary for Keats to discover a principle of spirituality within the limited bounds of worldly experience.

Keats makes it quite clear that apart from his basic nature and potentials, man, like the rose, has only his experience in the real world. This statement puts life and experience at the center of speculation concerning spiritual matters. Keats will not have man sent arbitrarily off to an after-life, so the burden of fulfilling the human potential must lie with worldly experience. It must be from a man's life in a world of hardship and death that his identity and, therefore, his soul will ultimately grow. In this sense, the real world might be considered the domain of the identity, and the attributes and functions of identity share the characteristics of its reality.

The next portion of the letter is still introductory, although it involves actual "Soul-making" more directly. It introduces the ideal, or eternal, aspect of Keats's philosophy, his ideas of "intelligence" and "God" and their relations to his "identity":

The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is 'a vale of tears' from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven--What a little circumscribe[d] straightened notion! Call the world if you Please '"The vale of Soul-making" Then you will find out the use of the world (I am now speaking in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal which I will here take for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which has struck me concerning it) I say 'Soul making' Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence-- There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions-but they are not Souls [the] till they acquire identities, till each one is personally

itself. I[n]telligences are atoms of perception--
they know and they see and they are pure, in short
they are God. . . .⁴

Here Keats substitutes directly his "Soul-making" idea for the "straitened" notion of convention. In replacing "tear" with "Soul-making" he restates his principle that the pain or misery of life is not meaningless, but creative, and that rather than being a place of senseless trials, the world has a use integral with man's true spirituality. He most emphatically asserts the relation of the "world" with spirituality, moreover, by the word "use"--there is a direct developmental connection between the world and the "soul." When he claims that human "intelligence" is "God," he is really making a distinction between human immortality and the more comprehensive concept of the soul. What is clear is that given man's immortal nature, his spiritual dimension derives from his experience. Deity is given; it is static. But the world projects the dimension of the soul.

Keats's phrase "personally itself," which seems so troublesome to Mr. Bush, takes on special significance here. Keats's concept of the "man of power" would provide the inconsistency Bush observes--but the soul is not this "proper self." Again, Keats is not concerned with ideas; so far he has mentioned only the divinity of intelligence,

⁴Letters, II, 101-102.

and experience in terms of sensory perception. The soul, he implies, results from the combining of these. He makes no mention of the conceptual or rational, so that "personally itself" must correspond with a mode of experience, an extended awareness, or a quality of vision. This is consistent with Murry's concept of the pure poetic mind. For Keats, experience and intelligence combine associatively, not logically, to create the soul instead of the self of the "man of power."

In Keats's view, then, "personally itself" means anything but a static, well-defined personal domain or exact being. Like identity, it is rather the capacity of heightened awareness through a more perfect vision, resulting perhaps in total ignorance of what the "man of power" calls self. It is, in fact, what later shall be described as a loss of self. Keats apparently had in mind the ability to empathize, which can result in an empathy with one's self in the truest expression of the soul. This empathy provides the ability to experience the momentary beauty of one's life, one's season as a rose, without regard to time, and to accept its beauty as eternal. It is a quality that is radiated but not contained by life.

The final passage of this letter to be considered begins to deal more specifically with the exact relation between the world and divinity, or the action of "Soul-

making." It is from this action that more exact inferences about identity as vision can be made, and a more precise apprehension of Keats's developing spirituality achieved. The added concept in this passage is the "heart"--it mediates between divinity, or intelligence, and the world. The heart represents the worldliness of man, and indicates the manner in which man's divinity is able to correspond with the world in his identity. But in the way that Keats describes the heart, it becomes the means of vision of the soul, and the prototype of the soul's experience. Keats writes:

. . . how then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them--so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one's individual existence? How, but by the medium of a world like this? This point I sincerely wish to consider because I think it a grander system of salvation than the chryst[el]ain religion--or rather it is a system of Spirit-creation.--This is effected by three grand materials acting the one upon the other for a series of years--These three Materials are the Intelligence--the human heart (as distinguished from intelligence or Mind) and the World or Elemental space suited for the proper action of Mind and Heart on each other for the purpose of forming the Soul or Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity. I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive--and yet I think I perceive it--that you may judge the more clearly I will put it in the most homely form possible--I will call the world a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read--I will call the human heart the horn Book used in that School--and I will call the Child able to read, the Soul made from that school and its hornbook. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! Not merely is the Heart a Hornbook, It is the

Minds Bible, it is the Minds experience, it is the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity--As various as the Lives of Men are--so various become their souls, and thus does God make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the sparks of his own essence. . . .⁵

To appreciate this passage, it is again useful to go to Murry. He writes, "In this remarkable passage, Keats is discovering a harmony in the world within man which completes the harmony he had previously discovered in the world without him."⁶ The external harmony had involved the mediation by man's life between the divinity of his nature and the "Elemental space" of the real world. Such mediation made "Soul-making" possible through the development of identity; to be "personally itself," Keats inferred, an intelligence must have had a relationship with the world of suffering and death. But now he deals directly with the development of identity by making a specific connection between the pain of the world and the intelligence that is divinity. As life mediated between divinity and the world, now the heart mediates between experience and intelligence to create the vision that Keats calls identity. The harmony which Mr. Murry writes of as appropriate to the "world within" is one whose motivation is the heart.

According to this reasoning, the importance of the heart is paramount in that it represents both the most

⁵Letters, II, 102-103.

⁶Murry, p. 137.

complex of human phenomena and the force in man whose action is the final cause of "Soul-making." It is central because in the minimal, metaphysical sense, the heart itself is man; the heart is man living and growing, or the sum of his experiences. It is his instincts, organized perceptions, emotions, or subconscious. The scientist would say that Keats's heart is the interface between man and his physical medium, or his physical self. There accuracy is assured. But more poetically, the heart is man's vague, but incontestable, knowledge that he is alive.

The heart's complexity derives from its dual character--it is experience of the world, and it is also experience of itself in the world. Like instinct and passion, it lies in an uncertain area between knowledge and experience, or memory and condition. For Keats, the complexity of the heart derived almost certainly from the earlier discussion of the world of troubles and sorrows. It is a simpler thing to be like the rose, at the mercy of external troubles. Man, however, is not only a victim of the world, but he can be a victim of himself as well, particularly of his passions. It is far easier to accept the necessity of troubles in the rose's world; but the acceptance of one's self as part of the world of troubles leads to the great problem of "Soul-making" itself.

In likening the heart to the subconscious, Murry also likened the intelligence to the conscious mind, stipulating three kinds of knowledge in Keats's system: "mind knowledge," or the intelligence, is the conscious mind; "heart knowledge" is the unconscious mind, and "soul knowledge" is the result of a certain action of the unconscious on the conscious mind. The process of "Soul-making," he infers, is the creation of this soul-knowledge.⁷

Soul knowledge begins when the conscious knowledge of the mind works on the unconscious knowledge of the heart. It is not what the mind is able to conclude from heart knowledge that is important, but in what manner the mind itself changes as it assimilates heart knowledge. Murry claims that such an assimilation yields self awareness of the mind, "soul knowledge," or a "knowledge that the soul is, a knowledge of the individual's true self existence" which "results immediately in a knowledge of the harmony and necessity of that universe, whose workings in the heart are the primary source of 'soul knowledge.'"⁸ These statements are comprehensible in terms of his discussion of the "indolent letter," where the poetic spirit is shown to be an instinctive being, whose characteristic is that heart knowledge overpowers the mind or reduces it to its own

⁷Murry, p. 139.

⁸Murry, p. 140.

level of instinctive activity. The instinctive activity of the mind, Murry implies, is the soul or the mind that speaks from the instinctive physical being, the surrendered mind in control of the heart.⁹

The meaning of this soul lies in self-identification through the world which forms the heart. In a sense, this describes a paradox resolved by the heart. That is, the mind which is God and sees, cannot see itself, or have identity, except by interacting with the heart. In the heart, the mind then sees itself or acquires knowledge of its existence. The mind achieves identity by looking at an altered part of itself in the heart. In the sense that the heart is of the world, the heart can even be symbolic of universal harmony which could easily itself be represented by another object entirely.

In this fashion identity again reduces to the subject of vision, or the apprehending of self in terms of something else. When Keats, or Murry, speaks of seeing the harmony of the universe, in particular, it is likely he speaks of seeing one's self by a representation in the heart. Identity, as Keats conceives of it, concerns the act of mind merging with something outside itself by sight, or some other sense, in order to achieve its most heightened awareness of self. This might be called asserting the "self"

⁹Murry, p. 137.

by experience of "Not-self," or indeed asserting existence through non-existence, or a variety of such propositions, all of which point inexorably toward "Negative Capability."

CHAPTER III

ADAM'S DREAM

In a discussion of the "Adam's dream" letter, it is possible to arrive at a very similar statement, one of Keats's identity as "vision." The statement must differ in that where the "Soul-making" letter started with the world and with real experience centering around the heart, now the first considerations are to be spiritual in the sense of the "imagination," with primary concern for the characteristics of Keats's kind of spirituality, "beauty," and "truth." Here the problem is to discuss the object of projection, the spiritual life itself, which has been derived from the world, and to relate it back to the projecting medium of identity in an effort to show the essential unity of all Keats's separate statements. In other words, the truth of the imagination is what is at issue here, and how it relates with the vision-identity of "Soul-making."

In this letter, which primarily concerns the "imagination," it is important that Keats's first remarks indicate his mind is, at the same time, occupied with ideas similar to "Negative Capability" and the identity of "Soul-making." At first he uses the word "genius," referring here to the poetic talents of men like Shakespeare, in

close association with heart--"I wish you knew all that I think about Genius and the Heart--";¹ such a juxtaposition associates the character of the poet with the propensities of the heart, or, at any rate, implies that when Keats thought of one, he also thought of the other. Taking "genius" to be a derivative of "Negative Capability," as he does later, what results is an association of the non-existence of the poet with the properties of the heart. Slightly further on, Keats makes this association again:

. . . Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect--by they have not any individuality, any determined Character. I would call the top and head of those who have a proper self Men of Power. . . .²

In this passage, a relationship of the poetic character with the heart is implied. Here the non-existence, or identity, of the poet is equated with "genius," which already has been associated with the heart. Since Keats breaks off at this point to speculate on the imagination, then, it might be inferred that what he has said does not bear on the imagination. On the other hand, considering his associative thought process, it is not significant that he seems to change his subject; it is rather proof of the relation of his ideas that he thought them in such rapid sequence. After all, he sat longing "to be talking about

¹Letters, I, 184.

²Loc. cit.

the Imagination--"³ while discussing the "Men of Genius." It is, therefore, likely that imagination put him in mind of "genius" and the heart, and that the letter is, until this point, a false start. This would seem to point rather toward his conceiving of imagination in terms of genius, the heart, and "Negative Capability." Murry implicitly contends for such an associative view of Keats's thought process in his discussion of "Soul-making," and it is obvious that his ability to appreciate Keats in this fashion brings him closer to the spirit of the letter he discusses. One aspect of the limitations found in the only extensive study of the "Adam's dream" letter, N. F. Ford's The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats, is that Ford's analytic technique allows for no such relationship; Ford begins analysis of the letter well into the second paragraph, only after all matters seemingly extraneous to his analysis have been finished.⁴

Actually, the first remarks about the imagination that Keats makes here, and the main theme of the letter, directly implicate the heart of "Soul-making":

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of Imagination-- What the imagination seized as Beauty must be truth-- whether it existed before or not--for I have the

³Loc. cit.

⁴Ford, p. 20.

same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are
all in their sublime, creative of essential
Beauty. . . .⁵

Keats here uses imagination to represent the activity of the soul whose identity, or existence, he frames in the "Soul-making" letter. He makes then an implicit distinction between the existence and capabilities of the soul by discussing here the imagination, or the apprehension of truth, as the soul's function. Keats evidently does not feel he must additionally justify the soul's existence in this letter, in that he chides Bailey for a "momentary start about the authenticity of the Imagination."⁶ It is likely that at this point Keats could, in fact, have provided justification with a "Soul-making" statement, but such was not his purpose. His references here to the functions of the soul, rather than to the soul's justification, are meant simply to relate those functions to "Soul-making" in order to make them more credible to a logical mind.

With these remarks it seems best to avoid definition, and to look for meaning relative to other ideas of Keats's already discussed. Truth, for example, seems not to lend itself to definition except in the most general terms, such as those of Bate: ". . . the joint 'identity,' character,

⁵Letters, I, 184.

⁶Loc. cit.

reality, and beauty of a phenomenon."⁷ Such a definition is a positivist's nightmare of undefinable terms. Yet in a functional sense, truth, taken in context, or defined by the associative relationship within each individual sentence, appears consistent, meaningful, and pertinent. In fact, the special power of Keats's language may indeed be his extended, almost objective, use of abstractions--he rarely pins himself down to logical, consistent definitions; rather, with unique relationships, he makes language rise to the demands of unique occasions. He is not at all restrained by his words; words are objects of organic complexity for him, and derive their significance more from their relation with other words than from intrinsic meanings. It will not do to discuss beauty, that is, except in terms of truth, imagination, and the heart, just as discussion of the soul requires at least both mind and heart. Keats's language, that is, forms a complex in which each word derives its meaning from its place in the whole. To study a single concept, or word, means to collapse the complex and sterilize the word. It seems to be the case with Keats's language as it is with the energy systems of nature, that to measure it is to destroy it.

⁷Walter Jackson Bate, The Stylistic Development of Keats, The Modern Language Association of America, Revolving Fund Series, XIII (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1945), p. 45.

With this spirit we can return to the passage. In writing, "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of the Imagination--," Keats is, at the same time, again summarizing the entire "Soul-making" argument, and, by association, asserting that the soul's existence is fulfilled by its peculiar function, imagination, whose faculty is the realization of truth. There is so much of Keats's thought and thought process in this remark that a careful investigation of it is necessary and possibly very fruitful.

First, it must be recalled that Keats summarized "Soul-making" by calling the heart the "Mind's Bible." Here, the "Heart's affections" equate with subconscious heart-knowledge, or the instincts and passions of man's worldly nature. By calling these holy, Keats indicates that he is thinking again of the "Mind's Bible," and, in different words, only asserting the "Soul-making" concept that the world is the book or basis of spiritual experience. In addition, the structure of this sentence must be appreciated for its associative relationships rather than for straightforward logic. When Keats writes, "the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of the Imagination--," it is far more important that "Heart's affections" and "truth of the Imagination" are yoked together than that they are both matters about which he is "certain." In this

sentence, it may be presumed that "and" is not just a conjunction, but signifies a complex relationship involving both causality and mutual definition of the terms heart, truth, imagination, and soul. In Keats's mind, that is, the idea of the soul referred to by the "holiness of the Heart's affections" was causally associated with the soul's function or the experience of truth by the imagination. In other words, this sentence illustrates his idea that the experience of truth testifies to the existence of the soul. Here, as in much of his expression, it seems sufficient for substantives to be linked by "and" for a variety of associative relationships to exist between them.

It is important that Keats makes such an association, for at first he seems to be introducing the terms truth and imagination peremptorily, not having defined them with respect to "Soul-making." As an introduction, he writes only that Bailey is "acquainted with my innermost breast"⁸ in respect to the heart. It may be that statements concerning the heart, similar to "Soul-making," possibly implicating these terms, had already been made, either verbally or in lost letters, indicating certainly that Keats had this particular character of the heart in mind now that he does write of the imagination and truth. At any rate, when

⁸Letters, I, 184.

these terms are, in fact, comprehended in the language and ideas of "Soul-making," the need for any precise definition of them drops away.

Imagination here can be considered a property of the soul, not as a thing in itself; it exists in the same way that sunshine exists. Where the soul is the mind's spontaneous vision of self as explained with reference to "Soul-making," the imagination is the manifest character of that vision, or the effluence of the soul's identity. As the sun is not defined except in terms of its light in a world of men, so the existence of the soul is manifest in imagination, or in the energy the soul gives off. And, to make the metaphor complete, as the sun's light is only known when it strikes an object, so is the existence of the imagination made known in its realization of truth. If any definition must be made of imagination, in the spirit of Keats, let it be called the light of the soul that illuminates truth.

But truth is related to "Soul-making" as well, in the spirit of the soul as self-vision. This can be shown by a further consideration of the sentence under scrutiny. If the relationship represented by "and" between the heart and truth of the imagination is one of causality, it is a question then of transposing truth back into the terms of "Soul-making." This can be done by looking first at the

parallelism of "Heart's affections" and "Imagination" as they appear in the sentence. On the one hand, Keats indicates by "Heart's affections" the existential quality of the soul, and on the other, by "Imagination," the functional. This is again like speaking of the sun and the sun's light; each phrase implies the other, but is unique in its orientation. At the same time, each is modified, the one by holiness and the other by truth. In this way truth becomes associated with the concept of the "Mind's Bible." Keats's meaning then is not just that the mind apprehends the heart as the imagination apprehends truth, but that the heart is the medium of vision of the soul, that it is the window through which the soul looks to find identity in the elemental space of the world, and that this vision through the heart is the same as the light of imagination, so that the identity conceived in elemental space must be truth.

Without defining beauty, then, the next part of the passage is also understandable as a "Soul-making" equivalent. The meaning here comes from a closer scrutiny of the relationship between the nouns of the sentence. In writing, "What the imagination seized as Beauty must be truth," Keats places an important restriction on the relation of the imagination with truth. He says, in effect, that the imagination cannot know truth for itself directly and

immediately as truth, but that what appears beautiful to the imagination is also truthful. In other words, truth is an intrinsic quality of the object of imaginative vision whose effect in the imagination is beauty. The "must" of Keats's statement implies that truth can only be known through beauty, and if imagination is to find its realization in truth, as has been suggested, it can only do so in respect to beauty. Beauty, then, might be called truth's knowable dimension, as heat is known by warmth, and happiness by the sudden agreeable aspect of all things. Beauty falls into perspective, therefore, in this manner: imagination is the sight of the soul; when the soul sees, the object of its vision is truth; beauty, then, is the characteristic by which the soul identifies truth. Yet whether beauty is a property of the imagination or of truth cannot be stated. It can only be said for sure that without either, it cannot exist. Keats's ultimate sophistication, and his indestructible intellectual achievement in both poetry and letters, owes much to this ability to seize meaning in relationships, and to avoid definition in favor of characterizing abstract nouns by their relationships with one another. There was nothing "consequitive"⁹ about his reasoning, but the precision with which he uses abstract

⁹ Letters, I, 185, ". . . I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning--."

language achieves the profundity of mathematical truth.

It is important now to examine Keats's "beauty" in terms of the heart and "world of sorrows," to see in what sense it is characteristic of the "Soul-making" process. Like most of Keats's terms, beauty both defines other terms by its relationships with them and finds its own definition in these same relationships. Keats wrote: ". . . I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty--."¹⁰ One must work with the associative relationships of the terms, particularly those concerning the word "sublime." Here again this word has the ring of traditional Christianity, and summarizes, for Keats, the significance of the heart in "Soul-making." The "Passions" correspond with the heart, subconscious, or with Murry's "heart-knowledge." "Soul-making" concerns the projection of these passions into the soul. The "Mind's Bible" and holiness have previously captured the spiritual quality of the soul relative to the heart. "Sublime" now does the same. "Passions in their sublime" need be considered nothing more nor less than the soul, and "creative of essential Beauty" implies the soul's causal relation with beauty. What Keats is saying here is that only through "Soul-making" is beauty known; "Soul-making" does not strictly create beauty, he infers, but in

¹⁰ Letters, I, 184.

it is born the faculty by which beauty is known. Or, "Beauty" is the knowledge of the soul's realization in the world.

"Adam's dream" is a near-poetic wording of this last statement. Keats writes:

. . . The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream--he awoke and found it truth. I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning--and yet it must be--Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever [when] arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections--However it may be, O for the Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts! It is 'a Vision in the form of Youth' a Shadow of reality to come--and this consideration has further conv[i]nced me for it has come as auxiliary to another favorite Speculation of mine, that we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated--And yet such a fate can only befall those who delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after Truth--Adam's dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that Imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as human Life and its spiritual repetition. But as I was saying--the simple imaginative Mind may have its rewards in the repeti[t]ion of its own silent Working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness. . . .¹¹

Here are a new set of relationships which clarify the meaning of truth with respect to imagination and "Soul-making." These relationships concern Keats's after-life. The greatest difficulty in apprehending their meaning derives perhaps from the mind's tendency to refer to a

¹¹Letters, I, 185. This is the famous "Adam's dream" passage; it refers to the passage of Milton's Paradise Lost which portrays the sleeping Adam dreaming Eve's creation, then waking to find her before him, VIII, 452-490.

stereotype of traditional religion's life-after-death. The hint that stereotypes must be avoided comes in the very phrase "Adam's dream"; for it is here that Keats implies that the "here after" he mentions, or the "spiritual repetition," is not restricted in time after man's death, but that achieving a soul implies a spiritual continuity spanning both life and death. Keats's dream is far more complex than Milton's concept in Paradise Lost, for it represents both man's eternal experience during life and its continuation into death. Like a dream, the experiences of the soul or imagination find their prototype in the world; they derive from the life of man, even as their eternal existence derives from the identification of man's intelligence with God ("they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God. . . ." ¹²) In this sense, "Adam's dream" becomes a metaphor for the relation of heart knowledge with mind knowledge in time: it represents a galvanization of the worldly and temporal into spiritual and eternal experience. With "Adam's dream," Keats's basic concern seems to be expressing the worldly basis of the eternal soul.

At first in this passage, Keats is not concerned with the after-life; he discusses it later as "auxillary" to the imagination, his primary concern. Yet it is not

¹²Letters, II, 102.

difficult to see why he himself was reminded of the auxiliary, for the language in which he couches his conception of the imagination is suggestive of both death and the soul's eternal life. "Adam's dream" is so good a model for these later considerations, moreover, that it is difficult to know for certain which idea put him in mind of which. One could follow his suggested ordering, although that seems largely a result of his being for the time interested in discussing only the imagination. But it seems very likely that, through "Adam's dream," the imagination and the eternal life of the soul were inseparable from one another.

"Adam's dream" is, at first, a model for the imagination and seems to derive its significance substantially from "Soul-making." As a metaphor, the dream seems to relate to the imagination as the unconscious working of the intelligence under the heart's influence. Where this relationship has been referred to as the soul whose perceptions constitute imagination, the fact that the dream vision concerns truth is particularly apt; the imagination, like the dream, is the perception of truth. The difficulty of the "Adam's dream" statement arises in the phrase "awoke and found it truth." Discounting for the moment the implication of immortality, this phrase focuses on the relationship between the world of experience, the heart, and the soul's

perception of truth. The great disparity in man's consciousness has always been that these have been out of phase; here Keats, in a word, shows how the reality of truth is transmuted into the world of experience. Awakening can only be a return to consciousness of the world in terms of heart knowledge or the mind's perception of the heart's experience. What had happened before that awakening, however, was that the mind, working instinctively, had found its identity in heart-knowledge, or had seen, with the vision of the imagination, into truth. What, in turn, had anticipated this imaginative experience was the need to understand the troubles of the world, or to comprehend the harmony which Keats's mind always strove to discover. The dream, then, or imagination, is the perception of harmony in the world of experience by the soul. The imaginative awakening from the dream when he "found it truth" is a discovery that the perceived harmony does indeed justify experience. This harmonizing of the true and the real is what Keats usually meant when he spoke of the soul, and perhaps the best statement of his "Soul-making" synthesis. Here is his best summary of how the spiritual is of significance only insofar as it concerns the heart. Such perceptions, such knowledge of harmony can only result from the book of sensations, the "Mind's Bible," the extralogical and the associative.

Keats supports his interpretation of "Adam's dream" as a final step of "Soul-making" in the world by writing, "I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning . . . ," or by activity of the mind alone. For truth to be known by the mind, that is, would be like measuring volume with speed, an experiment in disjoint dimensionality. Here Keats obliquely describes the nature of imagination by asserting the limitations on non-imaginative experience. "Consequitive reasoning," that is, can only be interpreted as logic, or a faculty of the man of power that he uses to procure results, the static conceptions and beliefs with which to define himself. It is a faculty ill-conceived to appreciate the harmony of life because by its nature it is bound into time. "Consequitive" seems to imply a rational, finite, and temporal sequence. Keats infers the similarity of "Soul-knowledge" with philosophical induction where "consequitive reasoning" results in truth only by an act of faith. The knowledge of the mind, Keats says, is inadequate for the truth of the world which can be apprehended by the imagination only. He re-emphasizes this point by citing the "objections" scientists must "put aside" in order to proceed with logic to a truth--those objections whose presence invalidates whatever truth is supposedly found. His implication is that clear perception comes

without objections, that try as a scientist might, the models he creates, unless products of the imagination, do not represent truth. Finally, he writes, "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" reaffirming that only in treating the heart as the source of wisdom will the soul rise to a perception of truth intelligence alone cannot hope for.

In addition, "Adam's dream" seems to represent the eternalization of the soul made during life. At first, awakening seems the merging of soul knowledge with the experience of the world, producing a sense of nature's harmony. Here awakening can be thought of as the emergence from life, with soul knowledge. The imaginative perception of truth had occurred with the inconstant character of a dream; now it has become a constant vision which repeats the harmony and sense of the soul on earth in a "finer tone." This constant vision of truth is identified with God, and is characterized by a purely spiritual harmony of which the world is a small part. This stretches the Miltonic conception, but that seems just in the light of Keats's "favorite speculation" that "we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated. . . ."

A more poetic statement of these ideas, however, follows another reference to the necessity of heart

experience and a statement of the fact that "such a fate" as Keats's "here after" cannot be had by those who do not understand the meaning of sensations. Keats wrote "Adam's dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that Imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as human Life and its spiritual repetition." This statement can be maddening or simple, depending on one's ability to make a leap of faith, as Keats himself may have done, judging by the incredible metaphysics of the language. Simply speaking, the sentence can be understood in context: let "spiritual repetition" be the eternal existence of the intelligence as part of God, and let "empyreal reflection" signify the eternal vision of truth, such as Keats frequently symbolized by the ancient deities on Olympus. He claims that "Adam's dream" means that, once created, the soul coexists through eternity with the intelligence, that where the intelligence is drawn back to exist forever with God, so the soul is projected into an eternal vision such as God himself enjoys.

Keats finally returns from consideration of auxiliaries to the relevance of "Adam's dream" to "Soul-making." "But as I was saying," he writes, "the simple imaginative Mind may have its rewards in the repeti[tion] of its own silent Working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness. . . ." Here it can be assumed he has

dropped temporal distinction to conclude that the soul is made of eternal abstract experience. There is no distinction here between the repetitions during life and after life. The soul is awareness of the imagination's perception of truth during life in the form of dreams, and after death continually in the here after.

Ultimately, the significance of the "Adam's dream" passage is that it states in metaphor the final action of "Soul-making." Here Keats uses such words as "awakened," "repetition," and "fine suddenness" to express this action, and to isolate the exact point of transition when truth is brought into correspondence with experience. He was sharpening his philosophical tools to the cutting fineness of poetry in order to express this correspondence and to realize it in language equal to the experience itself. It is no uncertain judgment then that restates "Adam's dream" as "a Vision in the form of Youth"; for this is the theme of his first supreme effort to realize it in poetry, "Endymion," where he joins rose-like beauty with the truth in which the eternal soul is conceived.

CHAPTER IV

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

The "Negative Capability" letter begins consideration of the poetic dimension of Keats's thought. Here Keats shows how the principles of the imagination and "Soul-making" apply to the creation of poetry by describing the character which objectifies the harmony perceived by the soul in the world. He claims, in short, that "Negative Capability" is the poet's identity in this harmony. It is another expression of the soul as vision, except discussed in terms of the soul's achievement, not its creation. "Negative Capability" then seems to be two things--the loss of self in identification with truth in the world, as described in "Soul-making," and experiencing the identity of another object to achieve its expression in poetry. The problem of "Negative Capability" is to rationalize these two ideas: to find the correspondence of "Soul-making" with the expression of harmony in poetry.

In this letter the poet's identification with objects is expressed in terms of "intensity," a quality of experience which relates to beauty and truth. His remarks are provoked by his disappointment with a Benjamin West painting:

It is a wonderful picture, when West's age is considered; But there is nothing to be intense upon; no woman one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth--Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout; but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness. . . .¹

Here intensity is the quality in poetry by which the imagination experiences truth through beauty, for it expresses the poetic imagination's apprehension of truth. In more abstract terms, intensity is the poetic, or aesthetic dimension of the soul.

In this passage, Keats is translating his philosophy of "Soul-making" into an aesthetic standard, and implying the poet's "Negative Capability." It is important to note in this regard that his thoughts proceed, as in "Soul-making," from the real to the spiritual; he mentions first faces swelling into reality and then the abstractions, beauty and truth. For him, the experience of a work of art begins with the physical object which represents the artist's heart experience. Heart experience is then transmitted through the object to the viewer and is usually characterized by the instinctive passionate responses of man's worldly nature which Keats epitomized by love. (In the "Adam's dream" letter, he had written ". . . I have the

¹Letters, I, 192.

same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty. . . ." And now he finds nothing so appropriate as the lovely face ready to be kissed.) The experience of the object depicted then enters into a relationship with the viewer's intelligence, for subsequently Keats writes that a property of intensity is that it causes disagreeables to evaporate. These disagreeables seem equivalent to the "numerous objections" of the "Adam's dream" letter and the shortcomings of "consequitive reasoning." For the viewer, intensity results in the impact of heart experience on the mind in the sense of "Soul-making," and thus in the object's becoming the means of identification by which truth is realized. Intensity then links truth with the primary sensual experience of art. Keats, therefore, remains true to his central idea, that the world is the prototype of spirituality. He goes further, moreover, by implying that any expression of spirituality must certainly proceed from the world.

Intensity is a projection of the imagination, where imagination is vision or the active quality of the soul. It is the reciprocal active quality of a work of art, or the capacity of that work to appear as truth having been conceived as truth by the imagination and faithfully executed by the artist. In the correspondence of intensity and imagination, then, is conceived the character of the

artist; that is, as intensity seems to be the expression of a work of art, so the artist's character consists of the ability to act as does the object itself--to act in a true expression of the object. This character must have an affinity with the object that perfects the identity achieved in "Soul-making." But, by it, contact is made again with the sensual, seemingly on the other side of the vision. That is, the artist could see in the experience of his own heart the truth of an object whose heart then becomes his own, with all of its senses, instincts, and passions. In this identification he can speak with the other's voice and create spontaneously a work of intensity. In the sense of "Soul-making," this is a process whereby the artist acquires a soul through identification. Then as the soul is conceived in the ability to apprehend truth, so is the artist of "Negative Capability" conceived in his ability to achieve intensity in a work of art.

Keats frames his idea more specifically after describing some of his recent experiences relating to "intensity," particularly the dinner party which so upset him (making him "start" instead of "feel"). He writes that in a conversation with Dilke several important things "dove-tailed" in his mind:

. . . & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously--I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of

being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason--Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all considerations.²

The meaning of this passage is perhaps most clear in relation to previous discussions of the mind's limitation, or the difference between intelligence and the soul. What Keats before referred to as disagreeables and "consequitive reasoning," here he calls an "irritable reaching after fact & reason. . . ." "Negative Capability," he says, in an artist, is first the ability not to depend on the sight of intelligence, or mind knowledge. The mind apprehends too simple and logical a view of things, inconsistent with the realities of heart experience. At best, it conceives "consequitive" ideas far from truth. The essence of heart experience, on the other hand, is wonder and the mystery of life itself. It is the basic nature of man which the language of science cannot explain. Keats means the "Mind's Bible" then, when he uses words such as "uncertainties," "mysteries," and "doubts." The character he discusses is one which confronts the experience of the heart, as the child confronts his hornbook, without the self-conscious purpose of becoming a soul. Nor do these words connote

²Letters, I, 193-94.

fear of the unknown; the way Keats uses them, they express rather a passivity--the character he describes declines the invitation to "irritable" explanation which mystery provides. Where such a character has been described as the mind acting spontaneously, realizing truth by identification with the heart, the artist of "Negative Capability" then recreates through intensity the experience of the soul.

Having suggested that Shakespeare was such a man of achievement in literature, referring again to Lear's intensity in particular, Keats continues by exemplifying his point with Coleridge. Coleridge could accept heart knowledge or the unexplainable nature of life's experience, its mysteries and uncertainties, because of his ability to capture the "fine isolated verisimilitude" from that mystery. This verisimilitude for him was one object alone perceived by the heart through which to experience truth. Coleridge sought no rational explanation of the world, but instead created with his poems instances of his "Soul-making" experience. Going beyond the letters, then, it is easy to grasp Keats's inference in poems such as "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," or "The Eolian Harp." In these poems, Coleridge has visions of truth by means of real objects, and his identification with these objects in terms of lights and shadows, or the wind of his imagination,

seems nearly complete. Keats implies that the poet of "Negative Capability" shows in his poem this identification of the mind with real objects by means of the heart. His profoundest meaning may be that the vision written in the poem, its intensity, is impossible without the physical object or heart experience. That is, the poem of intensity resembles the soul in that, for each, the real world is an induction to the spiritual. The poet of "Negative Capability," therefore, illustrates the induction.

Finally, Keats unifies the theme of the letters by comprehensively stating, ". . . with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration." This statement merges "Negative Capability" with the profoundest sense of "Soul-making." For Keats, the poet of "Negative Capability," the great poet, is primarily concerned with truth which he can know only by an imaginative apprehension of beauty. "Consideration" here equates with "disagreeables," indicating again that Keats is chiefly concerned with the contrast between soul knowledge and mind knowledge. One restatement of this would read: the instinctive acceptance of heart knowledge in a great artist makes mind knowledge irrelevant, a case, in Murry's words, of the subconscious overcoming the conscious mind. But the statement may be more meaningful in terms of a work of art; Keats has spoken above of

the repulsiveness of a work being overcome by its intensity, implying that the artist of "Negative Capability" transmits his own unifying soul experience to the viewer in such a way that no matter how ugly the work's detail, it seems incorporated into a beautiful harmony. This statement means that "consideration" is unexplored by the poet because of his preoccupation with truth. In addition, it is this involvement with truth, or the poet's realization of beauty, which annihilates the possibility that "consideration" has found any identity whatever in his work. In short, the work is a single truth because the poet's experience, conceived in soul knowledge, is indivisible, and because its beauties are conceived in the same destruction of "consideration" as is the poet's soul.

CHAPTER V
APPLICATIONS: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON
"ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE"

Thus far this thesis represents an effort to discover, with his letters, a principle of unity in Keats's thought which might serve as a basis for interpreting his poetry. Where Keats's thought has been found to be unified, it seems reasonable to expect a parallel conceptual consistency in his individual poems. It seems, moreover, that on the basis of the philosophy of the letters, models might be proposed expressing the unity of poems which appear paradoxical to many critics, contradicting the claims of those, in particular, who contend that the art of Keats's poetry concerns rationalization, or the reconciliation of opposing ideas.

An idea such as Allan Tate's seems particularly objectionable from this point of view, that the Nightingale expresses ". . . the impossibility of synthesizing, in the order of experience, the antinomy of the ideal and the real."¹ It seems, that is, that there is no such antinomy given that, for Keats, the real is the prototype for the ideal. R. H. Fogle's remarks on those of Tate seem also

¹"A Reading of Keats," On the Limits of Poetry (New York: Swallow Press, 1948), p. 177.

objectionable in view of a theory of Keats's philosophical unity. It seems inadequate to call Tate's analytical "dilemma" the "source of strength" in Keats's poetry.² But it is mainly Douglas Bush's comments, again, to which this chapter is addressed:

. . . conflict is central in the Nightingale. . . . Keats feels not so much the joy of the imaginative experience as the painful antithesis between transient sensation and enduring art. He cannot wholly accept his own argument, because both his heart and his senses are divided. The power of the imagination, the immortality of art, offer no adequate recompense for either the fleeting joys or the inescapable pains of mortality. Keats's early desire to burst our mortal bars, to transcend the limitations of human understanding, becomes in the Nightingale the desire for death, the highest sensation, or an anguished awareness of the gulf between life and death. In the end the imagination cannot escape from oppressive actuality; far from attaining a vision of ultimate truth, it achieves only a momentary illusion.³

Bush's interpretation of "Ode to a Nightingale" seems, indeed, to parallel his apprehension of disunity in the letters, or possibly to derive from it. In any case, his notion of contradiction in the letters supports such a reading of the ode. It is the purpose of this chapter to provide a contrasting reading of "Ode to a Nightingale"

²Richard Harter Fogle, "Keats's Ode to a Nightingale," PMLA, LXVIII (1953), 212.

³Douglas Bush, "Keats and His Ideas," The Major English Romantic Poets: A Symposium in Reappraisal, ed. Clarence D. Thorpe, Carlos Baker, and Bennet Weaver (Southern Illinois University Press, 1957), rpt. in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Keats's Odes, ed. Jack Stillinger (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 109.

based on the principle of unity that I have found to exist in the letters.

A poem such as "Ode to a Nighingale" is informatively read with a teleological perspective, which only the letters can provide. In fact, not to read the ode in this manner is to dismiss the meaning which Keats's own personality gives to it--it is to say, in effect, that the life whose meaning it crystalized is irrelevant to a just appreciation of it. As a work of art, the ode is certainly independent; this approach is not needed to justify its greatness; however, a clarification becomes necessary when critics seem to assign arbitrary values and meanings to a poem whose greatness cannot be clearly apprehended or stated in the language of analysis.

This reading of "Ode to a Nightingale" will not strive to find perfect unity with every part coordinated to a single effect. Such a statement would involve a kind of finite, quantitative approach quite incompatible with the obvious organic nature of the poem. Nevertheless, there are concepts outside of the poem which stand in relation to it like a magnet to the formation of metal shavings on a paper; and the poem's parts are ordered under stress of these concepts so that it is not with one another that they react, nor in the relations between them that notions of inconsistency are at all relevant. These concepts are

the facets of Keats's thought which have been dealt with in considering some of his letters. The illusive unity of the letters is the ideal ordering principle but without perfect statements of it, such equivalent ideas, "Soul-making," "Adam's dream," and "Negative Capability," may serve nearly as well to illustrate unification in "Ode to a Nightingale."

On the basis of the above discussions of the letters, one obvious way to exemplify unification in the poem is by comparing it with the idea of the "Adam's dream" letter. Such a discussion involves the concepts of "Negative Capability" and "Soul-making" as well. In this sense the return to self at the end of the poem is not an expression of confusion; nor does it imply that the spiritual experience of the poem is short lived. It is instead the integration of the soul's vision with experience of the real world; it is the reawakening into an appreciation of harmony in the world. If this comparison is followed, a very persuasive argument for the unified sense of the poem is achieved.

The most important element of such a comparison is the idea of sleep. In the first stanza, Keats describes his state as being very similar to that of Milton's Adam, whose spiritual vision was left unaffected by the body's torpor. Keats, in fact, makes it very clear in the

language of the letters that it is only the body, or the heart, which sinks under the influence of the bird's song:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
 One minute past, and lethe-wards had sunk. . .⁴

The majority of the words he uses to describe this sleep correspond to the sensations, or experience of the heart, suggesting that it is only experience of the physical world which ceases, leaving the vision of the soul unimpaired. First, Keats actually uses the word "heart" and then "sense," which relates to the "Life of Sensations" of the letters. He contrasts these with words such as "numbness" and "opiate" whose meanings concern mainly physical feelings, which, when associated with heart, suggest an escape from the "World of Pains and troubles" of "Soul-making." Moreover, to underscore the fact that the soul is still awake while the heart has been numbed, Keats immediately refers to the soul's experience, which suggests the "Negative Capability" that the whole poem expresses: "'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness,---" This is an expression of the identification which lies at the heart of Keats's soul experience-- it is the experience which caused the poet to go into his sleep, but it expresses as well the quality of soul

⁴The Poetical Works of John Keats, ed. H. W. Garrod (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 257.

experience he will have in the form of a dream while free from worldly sensations.

In the first stanza there could be an analytical distinction made between the world being left and the world being entered, for Keats is proceeding from pain to painlessness in an apparent expression of the opposition of these two worlds. Looked at in terms of "Soul-making," however, Keats is really asserting the necessity of a world of pain to school a soul, and that such a world must serve as a prototype for the "finer tone" of any other. If anything, Keats is claiming the amazing compatibility of the real and spiritual in asserting the numbing power of soul experience--the pains of the world school the human faculty in transcending all worldly things, including pain; if the world were truly inimical to the soul, it could not conspire in the interest of undoing its own evil.

In his letters, Keats compared imagination to "Adam's dream," writing "he awoke and found it truth." The sense in which the poem combines imagination with sleep is next in importance in this comparison. In the first stanza, Keats writes that sensations are dulled by absorption in the nightingale's song, or its "happiness." In the second, he moves further still from sensation in his identification, with "a draught of vintage" and "a beaker full of the warm South, / Full of the true, the

blushful Hippocrene. . . ." The "Hippocrene" is the muse's fountain, providing the faculty of inspiration to all those who drink from it; it is then a kind of inspiration or vision which Keats longs for, or the power of the imagination sufficient to bring him in closer identity with the bird than he had through its song. But he is still only anticipating the truly imaginative experience of the dream, for even in the third stanza, he has not yet begun to experience with the soul the harmony in which worldly suffering is appropriate:

Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Here Keats is still concerned with the "Soul-making" and the necessity for a world of pain. In particular, he is not yet seeing beauty with the imagination, a beauty whose brevity is also a just and truthful part of the world's harmony. It is not until the fourth stanza that he enters fully the dream, or imagination. Here there are no more sensations, only the last impediment to full identification, the activity of the "consequitive" mind as "the dull brain perplexes and retards. . . ." What signifies that the imagination now dominates is that Keats writes:

Already with thee! tender is the night,
 And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
 Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
 But here there is no light,
 Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
 Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

Of particular significance in this passage is the darkness that prevails within the grove of the nightingale. Whatever vision is possible derives from heaven, from the "Queen-Moon," or some "empyrean" phenomenon associated in Keats's mind with the principle of the soul. This is a darkness of the mind such as those Keats described in the "Soul-making" letter, saying, "they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God. . . ." But it is, at the same time, the beginning of the soul's vision. In this stanza then, having joined the nightingale beyond experience of the heart and mind, Keats finally enters the dream. "Already with thee!" is the expression that his physical and rational selves are submerged at the same time in the bird, and an indication that his imaginative vision has begun.

As an expression of Keats's imaginative vision, Stanzas V, VI, and VII then correspond to the dream of the letter. The first of these expresses the character of the soul as suggested by "Soul-making" where the world is a prototype for the soul and the "here after." This sense is conveyed by the most sensual imagery in the poem, "soft incense hangs upon the boughs," and "musk-rose, full of

dewy wine," combined with the suggestion of endlessness, or eternity, in such phrases as "seasonable month," "the coming musk-rose," and "embalmed darkness." Keats says here, "I cannot see," meaning that the intellect has been suspended; instead he must "guess" with a new kind of vision at the proximity of timeless sensual beauty he describes. Most significantly, this new vision is not overwhelmed, as is earthbound sight, by the process of death in life. While the mind sees misery in a world "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow," this new sight, by contrast, absorbs the "Fast fading" of violets in the greater truth of natural processes, or soul knowledge.

The second of these dream stanzas, written from an identification with the nightingale, suggests the particular eternity of the soul, which Keats expressed most directly in the "Adam's dream" letter, and whose consideration also led him into the "Soul-making" discussion. This stanza deals with the significance of death in the "Soul-making" process, and its implication for the existence of the soul thereafter. Here Keats toys with the idea of immortalizing his great pleasure, his soul knowledge, by dying at the height of its intensity. He writes,

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
 I have been half in love with easeful Death,
 Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
 To take into the air my quiet breath;
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
 In such an ecstasy!

He quickly recovers, however, with the realization that the bird is, after all, a part of the world, just as he is, and that to die would be to deprive himself of the bird's song and limit his potential for soul knowledge: "Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain-- / To thy high requiem become a sod." The significant word here is "requiem," an equivalent to "Bible" and "holiness" in its power to implicate heart experience as the source of the soul. The song, Keats infers, is an experience for the heart of man which is to be revered for its power to overcome his mind by intensity of feeling. It is a heart experience which Keats can use as a visual medium of imagination to see into the harmony of the world. With death, however, there would be no union of direct worldly experience with the knowledge of harmony in the world, for unless such beauty is transitory, a true acceptance of harmony cannot be achieved. But once there is such acceptance, it is as everlasting as the primary deity of man itself.

Stanza VII concerns perception of harmony in the world through soul experience. Here Keats proceeds from his own mortality to the mortality of humanity, striking at the truth of the human condition. The nightingale's song is now a medium through which he transcends time to perceive that truth--it has become eternal and the human capacity which always responded to it becomes immortal in

spite of death:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn. . .

It is not just having been "heard," for hearing implies only the mind; hearing is by inference like sight. The reference to "emperor and clown" serves more to provide a contrast with Ruth than to add to the depth of the concept of eternity. With respect to Keats's concept of the soul, emperors are men of power, while clowns are children. The song which passes into the "sad heart of Ruth" here bears the entire weight of "Soul-making." By identifying with Ruth through the song, Keats is able, in his own soul experience, to appreciate the necessity of her pain and mortality just as he did the rose's. In so doing, he feels his own mortality absorbed in the harmony that embraces hers. This is truly seeing into the heart of things and lacks only re-emergence from the dream into experience of the real world once again to fully accomplish the process of "Soul-making."

Finally, Stanza VIII deals with the reunion of the dream vision with real life in the fulfillment of "Soul-making." In terms of "Adam's dream," this is where he wakes to find truth. This stanza gives much trouble to the critics who view it as a fruitless, undesired return.

Without such return, however, the truth of the heart, its harmony in the world, cannot be known, nor has soul experience been fulfilled. It is less significant that the narrator returns "Forlorn" than that he, in fact, returns. "Forlorn" deals more with the incidental shock of return, although in much criticism, it has come to represent the primary meaning of the stanza. It is possible to make much of the fact that awakening was a painful experience; on the other hand, it is not to be denied that the new knowledge of the dream persists beyond awakening, implying perhaps that the acquisition of this knowledge is the important thing, not the contrast between being awake and being asleep.

It is this knowledge that persists, this sense of harmony, which in terms of "Adam's dream," is now found to be truth. That is, the truth of mortality discovered in Stanza VII is, by implication, now found when the narrator awakens to a world little different from the ancient cornfields of Ruth; its meaning need not be restated precisely here, for it is amply captured as "a vision, or a waking dream," well-remembered for its having been confused with wakefulness. Wakefulness is the crucial idea of the stanza then, for by declaring that he does not know if he was asleep or awake, Keats merges his vision with his present apprehension of the real, physical world. He had found it

necessary to see the truth of that world as a vision, with the eyes of his soul. Ultimately, by saying "Do I wake or sleep?" Keats is not expressing disbelief in his vision, nor does he doubt the nature of the truth he has apprehended; rather, he is asserting that with soul knowledge one views the real world for its truth, or for its identity with a vision of truth. In fact, he is expressing his identity in the harmony or truth of the world as the fulfillment of "Soul-making."

A fortunate aspect of such a comparison is its inference that the "Ode to a Nightingale" expresses a resolution of the paradox in Keats's thought as framed by Mr. Bush. An analogy with "Adam's dream" necessitates the "vision" by which identity is realized in harmony, and also the identification by which the self is lost to an object in the world. Through analogy, the identity of the "Soul-making" letter expresses "Negative Capability" in the poem, objectifying a unification of the two concepts.

Moreover, the poem also represents the evolution of heart experience into soul knowledge. The nightingale's song is the heart experience which overwhelms both heart and mind to provide a vision of truth. This vision of truth concerns the considerations of mortality in "Soul-making." Keats sees himself as Ruth or the rose, with full knowledge and acceptance of the harmony that requires not

only the end of his individual pleasures but also his death. In coming back to "my sole self" in Stanza VIII, Keats is asserting his soul identity in the world as a result of the soul experience gained in his vision. The inevitable result of his momentary identification with truth in the world is that he is reunited with himself to enjoy his identity as a man with a soul.

On the other hand, the vision of truth, particularly its expression, is an act of purest "Negative Capability." Nothing expresses the theme of the "Negative Capability" letter so well as the course of Keats's relationship with the nightingale through its song. At first he is absorbed by the sound alone, but then, as though climbing up a lattice of melody, he is soon drawn into the foliage from which it flows, and where in "shadows numberless" he finds himself at last with the nightingale. The progress toward the nightingale, toward, in a sense, being the bird, is also Keats's progress toward the vision of truth sustained through Stanzas V, VI, and VII, where he transcends mortality; but it is a progress by means of the nightingale, for it is the heart experience of the song that still sustains him--his heart is numb now but the music of the bird he still hears is like experience of the world repeating itself in "a finer tone"; the song has become a part of him, making his identification with the nightingale

slightly more plausible. And most conspicuous is the degree to which, in this identification, all other "disagreeables" seem to disappear. Considerations of the "dull brain" cease to affect him, he cannot think of the finality of death, and reality has been transformed to a distance of "faery lands forlorn." The nightingale is, in fact, Keats's own "fine isolated verisimilitude," an experience unhinged from its context in the real world and made to bear the weight of "the Burden of the Mystery"⁵ and so transcend it. In his total absorption with the nightingale, Keats shares in its ability to transcend time, becoming himself an independent truth. In "Ode to a Nightingale," there is indeed no "irritable reaching after fact & reason," nothing "repulsive"; all gives way to the presence of the nightingale, the presence of Keats, and the manner in which they have joined inextricably in an expression of supreme intensity. Coming away from the nightingale in the end, Keats is doing little more than saying "I am writing this poem; time is nothing; my soul, this experience, my knowledge of self and truth, is the nightingale and here to stay forever."

⁵Letters, I, 277.

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